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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 05 DAMASCUS 000759

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#) [LE](#) [SA](#) [IZ](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: TURKISH SUPPORT EMBOLDENS ASAD BUT PROVIDES BEST HOPE FOR COAXING SYRIA FROM IRAN

REF: A. DAMASCUS 697
[1](#)B. ANKARA 1486

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Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter, Reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (S/NF) Summary: President Bashar al-Asad's September 16-17 working visit to Istanbul produced agreement on the creation of a high-level strategic cooperation commission, visa-free travel between Syria and Turkey, and a Syrian offer to work to rehabilitate Syrian PKK members. The deliverables represented a modest step in strengthening bilateral ties, but they symbolized a deepening of strategic coordination in which Ankara figures more prominently in Syria's approach to the region. The October 13 meeting of Turkish and Syrian ministers in Aleppo and Gaziantep produced an ambitious action plan in energy, water, trade, cultural, and security cooperation for PM Erdogan and President Asad to formalize when Erdogan visits Syria in December. Turkey's methodical deepening of relations with Damascus offers Syria a strategic buffer against international pressure and a ready mediator willing to help Syria mend strained relations with neighbors, such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and even Lebanon. At the moment, the SARG is seeking to characterize Turkish-Israeli tensions as a show of Turkish solidarity with Syria and Palestinians, while maintaining Iranian-Syrian-Hizballah military cooperation that has grown significantly stronger since 2006. The major challenge ahead is to prevent Syria from using closer relations with Turkey as a means of resisting U.S. influence and pursuing policies that would make comprehensive peace less likely. In the long run, Asad's increasing trust of PM Erdogan offers the best hope of luring Syria out of Tehran's orbit. End Summary.

Deepening Syrian-Turkish Ties

[1](#)2. (S/NF) According to Syrian and other diplomatic contacts, President Asad's September 16-17 trip to Istanbul was notable for his close personal ties to Turkish PM Erdogan

and for the agreement reached by the two sides to establish a high-level strategic cooperation commission. As Embassy Ankara reported in Ref B, the two sides also agreed to announce agreement on visa-free travel across their shared border, a measure that had been under discussion since President Gul's visit to Damascus in mid-May, according to Turkish diplomats here. Additionally, there were discussions on how Syria might help to support Turkey's outreach to Kurdish communities and its efforts to "rehabilitate" PKK militants. Asad, according to several media reports, agreed to follow Turkey's lead and provide favorable treatment to some 1500-2000 Syrian PKK members if they return from Iraq to Syria, so long as they renounce violence and turn themselves into Syrian authorities. According to the Turkish Embassy here, Asad and PM Erdogan discussed the need for Syria to consider measures that would make Syria more attractive for Syrian Kurds.

13. (S/NF) Al-Hayat Bureau Chief Ibrahim Hamidi (strictly protect) reported the one-day meeting on October 13 of ten ministers from each side began work on a comprehensive set of bilateral agreements that the Turkish and Syrian Prime Ministers will formalize sometime in December. These include deepening of security and intelligence cooperation on counterterrorism and border security; establishing a joint oil exploration company; cooperation in electricity generation; water management cooperation; expanding rail travel between the two countries; cooperation on port expansion; expanding natural gas pipelines and infrastructure; and increasing Turkish investment in Syria.

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These projects will open Syria to increased trade from Turkish firms, comments Damascus Chamber of Commerce Secretary General Bassem Ghrawi (strictly protect), at a time when the Syrian government is struggling to move forward with economic liberalization. Whereas the Syrian regime is "taking its time" to evaluate its EU Association agreement, President Asad remains fully committed to expanding economic ties with Turkey, even if the opportunities for Syrian businesses in Turkey are "far less" than Turkish opportunities in Syria, says Ghrawi.

Turkish-Israeli Row Suits Syria

14. (S/NF) Beyond the promise of economic modernization, Turkey offers Syria diplomatic support, particularly in Syria's frustrated efforts to pressure Israel to negotiate a return of the Golan on its terms. No country emerged more pleased by Turkey's decision to postpone plans for the "Anatolian Eagle" military exercise than Syria. Turkish attempts to downplay the political significance of this action did little to quell Syrian efforts to exploit the decision itself and Turkey's criticism of Israeli policies on three issues: the Golan track, the West Bank (al Aqsa and settlements), and Gaza. The Syrian Minister of Defense's crowing on October 13 about a future follow-up Turkish-Syrian border security exercise grabbed Syrian and regional headlines. Even as Ankara's rhetoric cooled and avoided mention of a Syrian-Turkish exercise, Syrian officials, including President Asad, relentlessly singled out Israel as the "obstacle" to peace discussions and called on the Israeli government to "choose between occupation and peace." The Syrians also called on European partners to play a greater role in Middle East peace issues and expressed concern about the gap between U.S. rhetoric favoring peace and the absence of a workable process to achieve it.

15. (S/NF) Turkey's willingness to "stand up to Israel" emboldened Syrian thinking, argues Hamidi. "Thanks largely to Turkey, Syria is now focusing on increasing pressure on Israel, without bearing the blame for the impasse," he observed. Turkey's posture, moreover, has led President Asad to insist that any future Israeli-Syrian peace talks must return to the Turkish-facilitated process that ended in December 2008. Israeli PM Netanyahu's assertion that Israel

no longer views Turkish mediation as tenable had little impact, argues Hamidi. Before, Syria faced Israel alone with military cooperation from Iran. "Now, Syria has political cover from Turkey in addition to military support from Iran," he contends. Some Syrian officials, adds Hamidi, see Turkey as providing "strategic balance" to "open-ended" U.S. support of Israel.

¶6. (S/NF) Our Turkish colleagues in Damascus claim PM Erdogan's and FM Davutoglu's critical comments of Israel should not be taken out of context. At the same time, Turkish DCM Aydin Acikel notes, Turkey's position is "strongly supported by Turkish public opinion." Acikel stresses Ankara wants to repair relations with Israel, but it nonetheless wants to build confidence with Damascus. Syria, he offers, has shown every sign it is ready to negotiate seriously to achieve peace. "The key to changing Syrian behavior is to make them feel more secure." "Isolation and sanctions," he contends, "won't work." Acikel bristles at the suggestion that Turkish criticism of Israeli policies might reduce the prospects of achieving peace because it emboldens Syria, provides no incentive for Syria to curtail its relations with Hizballah and Iran, and makes it less likely Syria will meet Israeli concerns about Syria's future

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strategic orientation. Acikel claims Turkish policy is providing Syria "the confidence it needs" to move gradually away from Iran, "on its own terms." He nonetheless acknowledges Turkey's critical stand on Israel may diminish Israeli perceptions of Ankara's even-handedness.

¶7. (S/NF) Syrian officials are "hearing only part of the message," observes Orient Center Director Samir al-Taqi (strictly protect), a contact close to FM Muallim whose 2008 Track-II efforts with the U.S. landed him in hot water with the SARG, so that he now converses with Embassy staff only during chance encounters. The SARG cannot disguise its glee over Turkey's willingness to criticize Israel, he notes. In fact, Syrian officials are trying to use closer ties to Turkey and Saudi Arabia to bring Ankara and Riyadh closer to Syrian-Iranian positions to increase pressure on Israel to return to peace negotiations on Syria's terms. Still, al Taqi says, "a few" Syrians realize Turkey alone will be unable to deliver Israel to the negotiating table. SARG officials recognize the Turkish-Israeli rift may buy Syria time and that deepening ties between Damascus and Ankara may provide an alternative to Iran's constant pressure to confront Israel militarily. "Nothing but peace itself will change the dynamics with Iran and Syria," he contends. Achieving peace, however, will depend ultimately on the U.S. "That's why we need you to live up to President Obama's rhetoric (on comprehensive peace)." But until there's movement on the Golan track, Turkey's stand-off with Israel affords Syria more space and reduces pressure for it to make gestures, al-Taqi says.

Turkey Buffers Syria Against Iraqi Charges

¶8. (S/NF) FM Davutoglu's personal engagement to resolve Syrian-Iraqi tensions over the August 19 Baghdad bombings helped to preserve Turkey's relationship with both countries.

Most Syrian observers, however, judge Turkish mediation as favoring Syria, contends Syrian businessman and former MP Ihsan Sanker (strictly protect). Egyptian Political Counselor Adel Ibrahim (strictly protect) concurs. FM Davutoglu facilitated several meetings with Arab League involvement, with a focus on Iraqi information intended to document claims that former Baathist regime elements in Syria were responsible for the attacks. Many Syrians, adds Ibrahim, believe the Iranian government worked to convince PM Maliki that Syria had played a role in the attacks. When the Iraqi side failed to justify these claims, "the Turks told us and others" the Iraqi information was "less than persuasive," reports Ibrahim.

¶9. (S/NF) The Turkish government sought to "ensnare" both

sides into a process that would lead to a resolution, but in the end, Turkey appeared to "implicitly endorse Syria's position by not backing Iraqi allegations," judges International Crisis Group representative Peter Harling. Meanwhile, Turkey signed over 40 memoranda of understanding with Iraq in late October as part of its bilateral strategic cooperation council meeting, just as it is likely to do with Syria when PM Erdogan visits Syria in December. According to Ibrahim Hamidi, the Turkish played the honest broker and provided Syria with a way to demonstrate its good faith. When Iraq insisted on UN involvement and balked at further talks with Syria because it refused to recognize Baghdad's information as "credible," Turkey's mediation provided a "buffer" against further Iraqi allegations. No one, observes Hamidi, appears to be overly concerned by Syria's refusal to receive a UN envoy to discuss the August 19 attacks.

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Help With Saudi Arabia

¶10. (S/NF) According to Turkish DCM Acikel, PM Erdogan personally lobbied President Asad to travel to Jeddah to change his decision not to attend the opening of King Abdullah University of Science and Technology. "The KAUST visit opened the way to King Abdullah's trip to Damascus, and from there, closer Saudi-Syrian cooperation across the region," he argues. Local observers are quick to point out that Yemeni FM Qirby's October visit to Damascus was one immediate result of King Abdullah's visit to the Syrian capital. The SARG's public support of the Yemeni Government's efforts to deal with breakaway tribes in the north represented an important gesture to the King, assesses Syrian historian and commentator Sami Mubayed. Turkey, he adds, has encouraged the SARG to show solidarity with King Abdullah on Yemen because it represents a major concern for Saudi Arabia.

And Lebanon?

¶11. (S/NF) Turkey has also quietly tried to encourage Syria to respond positively to King Abdullah on the formation of a government Lebanon, argues Ibrahim Hamidi. Unfortunately, he adds, "Lebanese politics involve more variables than just Syria and Saudi Arabia." Though a number of contacts, particularly those from Lebanon, have sensed an improvement in the mood among Syrian officials regarding developments in Beirut, no one is prepared to say a deal is imminent, observes Basil Hamwy, Director of Bank Audi operations in Syria. President Asad noted the "urgent need" for a consensus government and called on the Lebanese parties to reach an accord during the October 22-23 visit of Finnish President Halonen. French FM Kouchner, meanwhile, visited Beirut on October 23 and credited Syria for not interfering in Lebanese politics. In a move seen here as overtly intended to curry favor with Damascus, he publicly put the onus on the Lebanese parties themselves. Against this backdrop, Turkish FM Davutoglu has worked behind the scenes, delivering messages to Syrian officials from Lebanese PM-designate Saad Hariri, confirms Acikel, who argues Ankara believes a deal in Lebanon would help Syria. Still, even the Turks appear less than fully confident that Syria's allies will be willing to reach a deal. "Aoun is tough, and it's frankly not clear how closely his actions are connected to Hizballah or Damascus," comments Acikel.

Nudging Syria Away from Iran

¶12. (S/NF) Turkey's patient and cautious decade-long approach to building relations with Syria has generated a comfort level that few countries enjoy here. The President's willingness to take Turkish advice and openly defer to

Turkish preferences contrasts with the pro forma appearances that Asad seems to endure with Iranian counterparts out of a sense of obligation. Asad undoubtedly notes, as do we, Turkey's internal stability and its policy of promoting regional peace versus Iran's domestic problems and its outward focus on fomenting regional conflict. Asad no longer makes any pretense of being in the business of mediating between the West and Iran on the nuclear file, and his overriding interest is to keep Syria out of harm's way if Israel ever decides to attack Iranian nuclear sites.

¶13. (S/NF) To be clear, we assess Syrian-Iranian security

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relations to be stronger than ever, but Iran's internal divisions and the end of Syria's isolation have offered Damascus new options. Syria's growing confidence is evident in its decision to postpone the signing of an association agreement with the EU, the SARG's claims (now backed by French officials) that Damascus bears no responsibility for the Lebanese political stalemate, and the increased volume and frequency in recent Syrian rhetoric against Israel. At the moment, Damascus seems content to use Turkey's support for tactical advantage and as a means of avoiding strategic choices that would become necessary if and when it ever signed a peace treaty with Israel. Less clear is whether the Syrian government would be capable, even it wanted to, of changing its strategic orientation after three decades of reliance on Iran and Hizballah. Asad has indicated Syria will maintain relations with Iran, but Syria's interest in peace might produce a change in the nature of those relations, if and when a peace agreement ever materialized.

¶14. (S/NF) Syria would almost certainly never reach this point of decision without strong GOT influence. While the U.S. and Turkey generally share the same overriding objectives of regional comprehensive peace and stability, Turkish officials here stiffen when we broach the possibility of closer U.S.-Turkish cooperation to influence Syria on specific issues (e.g., Iran or Lebanon). Given Ankara's jealous approach to Syria, one that applies equally to French and EU efforts to engage Damascus, our challenge is to nudge the deepening of Syrian-Turkish relations toward strategic Syrian choices necessary for achieving shared objectives, even if we differ with Ankara on tactical approaches.

HUNTER